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ABSTRACT

Ten strategies used to facilitate use of research to inform practice in urban schools are reviewed in this digest. The strategies are: (1) using ongoing, building-based staff development (SD) programs to translate instructional research into practice; (2) planning SD programs collaboratively with district personnel to ensure their relevance to local needs; (3) incorporating training components that use demonstrations, practice, feedback, and coaching; (4) including opportunities for teachers to share ideas and attempt research in conjunction with other teachers; (5) designing SD programs to use methods validated by research and to target area of needed student improvement; (6) cultivating the notion that student outcomes can be improved through high standards and high expectations; (7) committing to long-term training to improve teachers' attitudes and knowledge of skills; (8) developing ongoing support systems to help teachers transfer new learning into practice; (9) assessing program effectiveness through teacher performance and student achievement; and (10) strengthening the link between the research community and teacher preparation programs. (SLD)

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By Helené L. B. Hodges

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Spotlight on Student Success

A digest of research from the Mid-Atlantic Laboratory for Student Success No. 103

Using Research to Inform Practice in Urban Schools

Ten Key Strategies for Success

by
Helené L. B. Hodges

Now in the midst of the last decade of the 20th century, urban educators nationwide are increasingly being challenged to hold schools accountable for providing the best education possible to all students. Unless we provide opportunities for teachers to continuously enhance their knowledge and skills, however, reform efforts will be stifled. Thus, professional development has become one of the cornerstones in designing and implementing effective strategic school improvement plans.

It is commonly accepted that ongoing professional learning allows teachers to keep abreast of educational research, which has strong implications for curriculum and instruction. Equally important, however, staff development (SD) programs also have the potential of renewing practitioners' enthusiasm for teaching, as well as providing them with new ideas for approaching instruction that are capable of significantly improving students' performance outcomes.

Thus, if we truly desire systemic change, we must ensure that teaching staff are properly prepared and trained by making a commitment to use staff/professional practices that reflect the best we have to offer from the knowledge base. Conversely, if we are to effect sustained school improvement efforts, practitioners and researchers must continuously share and exchange this knowledge base with one another.

How is this shared language about effective instructional practices best developed? The following strategies aim to facilitate use of research to inform practice in urban schools.

Strategy #1:

Practitioners need ongoing, building-based SD programs with coaching, modeling, and active assistance during implementation of new practices to translate the latest instructional research into practice.

Leading researchers affirm that the most effective vehicle for helping practitioners make this transference is offering ongoing, building-based staff development and training in which teachers and administrators learn new instructional strategies; see them demonstrated; participate in structured practice opportunities; obtain feedback and support from trusted peers; and participate in ongoing practice, feedback, and coaching.

Strategy #2:

SD programs should be planned collaboratively with district personnel and school staff, conveniently located and scheduled, and directly relevant to classroom activities. Principals and supervisors should also have participatory roles.

The ability to provide high-content, expert pedagogy, and effective support to students is directly related to the extent to which teachers and administrators engage in activities that contribute to their own professional growth. The organization and culture of schools must provide a high degree of support not only to students but to staff members seeking to enhance their knowledge and skill.

Strategy #3:

Teachers' performance will most likely improve in school-based SD programs that contain the following five training components: presentation of material, demonstration of skills, practice, feedback, and coaching.

It is essential to plan training experiences for teachers based on the best available knowledge of how adults learn. Moreover, training opportunities should be differentiated depending on the expected outcomes and goals of the SD experience.

Strategy #4:

SD should include ongoing opportunities for teachers to share ideas; try out new techniques; engage in reflective problem solving with peers; conduct collaborative action research; and participate in flexible peer coaching activities.

Also, teachers are more likely to change their behaviors and continue to use new ideas when they become

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aware of a need for improvement through an analysis of their own classroom observation profile.

Strategy #5:

SD programs should be designed to use methods validated by research, and to target areas of student performance in need of improvement.

Effective SD must be grounded in sound teaching approaches that contribute to increased student and teacher learning; any approach to teaching must be consistent with the best available knowledge of how children learn. In short, school staff should be provided inservice programs that prepare them to better identify and meet the unique learning needs of their increasingly diverse student populations.

Strategy #6:

SD programs should cultivate the notion that student outcomes can be improved by maintaining high standards and demonstrating high achievement expectations for all students.

Children are strongly influenced by what they hear from their family, friends, teachers, schools, institutions, and society. With this in mind, research emphasizes the overwhelming importance of a teacher's belief that all students can learn. When teachers hold this belief, they are more likely to provide the opportunity, time, and support for each student to master challenging content.

Strategy #7:

School districts should commit to long-term training to improve teachers' attitudes and knowledge of skills.

Significant change in educational practice does not occur quickly. It is the result of long-range staff development programs designed with a 3- to 5-year time frame.

School and district administrators must also be cognizant of two important realities. First, even the most successful SD programs experience early implementation problems. Second, the quality of SD matters little if teachers find training difficult to access. To help teachers take full advantage of professional development opportunities, administrators should (a) provide release time; (b) offer variable teaching loads; (c) provide adequate library resources; and (d) help teachers overcome isolation by encouraging site visits to other classrooms and schools.

Strategy #8:

Ongoing support systems, grounded in sound change process theory, must be developed to help teachers transfer new learning from inservice training to professional practice in the classroom. Further, efforts to change professional practice should be rewarded.

For classroom teachers, adopting new practices is often a gradual, complex, and difficult process, requiring continued support on several fronts. If this support is to be effective, and the newly learned techniques are to be fully implemented, the following tenet must underlie all aspects of training: Teachers will be motivated to change only when they truly believe the new practices will positively impact students' academic, behavioral, or social outcomes.

Because letting go of familiar practices is frequently accompanied by ambivalence, an initial goal of SD should be changing attitudes. More than any extrinsic reward (such as pay or time off), what is needed to motivate teachers to change is the belief that they will become better teachers.

Strategy #9:

Program effectiveness should be assessed by teachers' classroom performance and by student performance on significant measures. Assessment should be conducted in a nonthreatening fashion after desired new teacher behaviors have been observed.

Evaluation should address several key questions: Did teachers apply what they learned? If so, how frequently? Which SD objectives did and did not transfer to in-class performance? What influence did the SD program have on teachers' attitudes, skills, and knowledge base? And perhaps most importantly, what is the impact on student achievement, behavior, and attitudes?

Systemic change must be integrated and comprehensive, not focused on one factor alone. We must integrate the knowledge base on what works into our curricula, pedagogical practices, and models of school organization if we seek to improve educational outcomes for all children.

Strategy #10:

The link between the research community and teacher preparation programs needs to be strengthened.

Most teachers would agree that their preparation and training for teaching came from their actual work experiences rather than from the preservice education courses they took in college. Continuing studies have shown that teachers need more than generalized courses to prepare them for the rigors of teaching.

In particular, they require specialized programs focused on helping them meet the challenges they face in teaching diverse student populations, with a special emphasis on issues of ethnicity, SES, and gender.

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Related Publications

The ten strategies briefly listed above are discussed in detail in the following paper: Hodges, H. (1994, September). *Using research to inform practice in urban schools: Ten key strategies for success.* Paper presented at "Improving Urban Schools: Better Strategies for the Dissemination and Utilization of Knowledge," an invitational conference cosponsored by the National Center on Education in the Inner Cities, Alexandria, Virginia.

If you would like to receive a copy of this paper, or would like other information, please contact the LSS Information Services Coordinator at (800) 892-5550.